

The Devil and Bill Blatty: Moving on With the Man, His Millions and His Movie

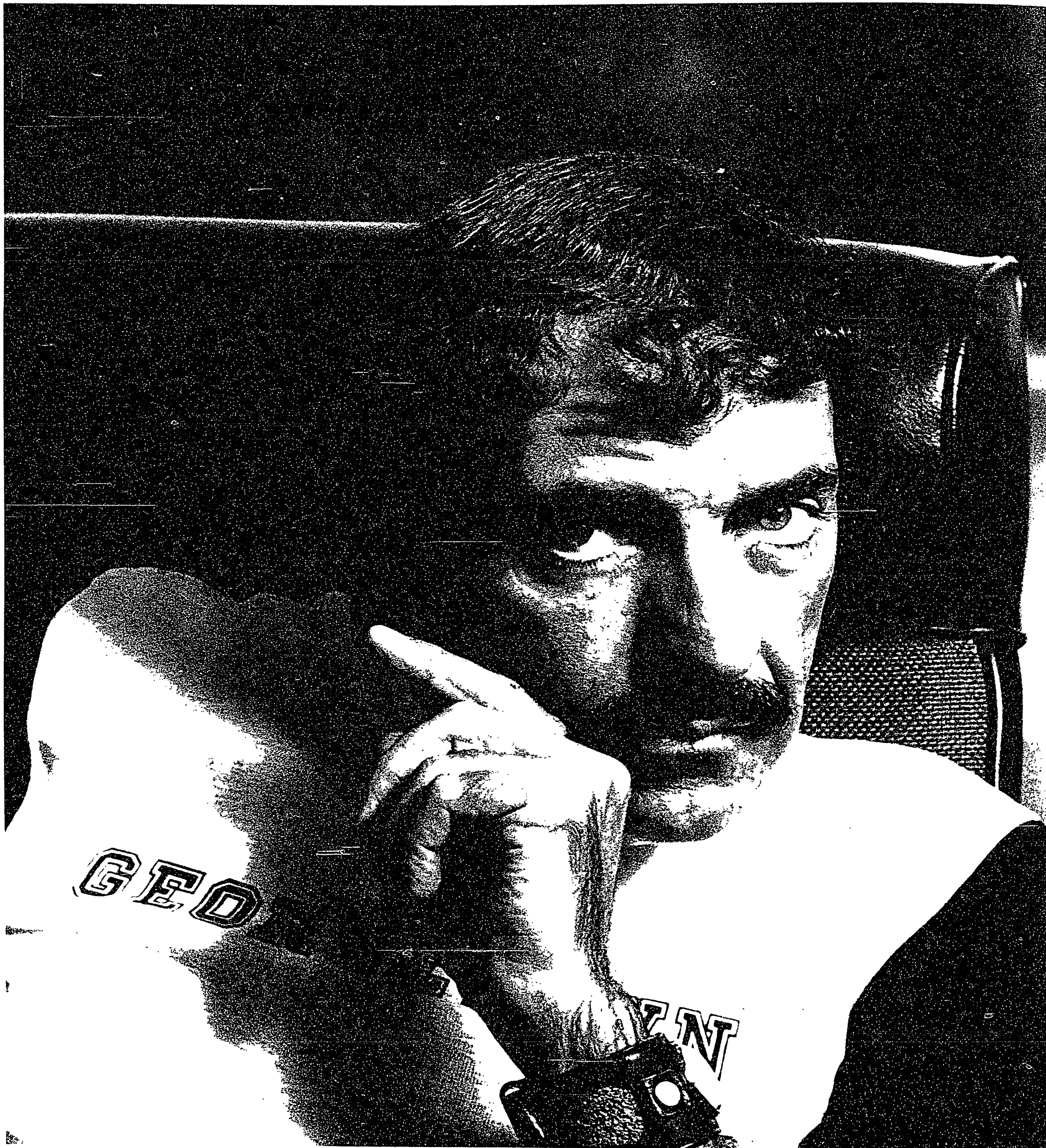
By Kenneth Turan

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Photographed by Ross Chapple



*Bill Blatty, author of *The Exorcist*, in repose, in alumnus sweatshirt.*

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The Devil and Bill Blatty

Moving on With the Man, His Millions and His Movie

By Kenneth Turan

First came the words, more than 100,000 of them, turned out over nine months by a man known almost exclusively as a writer of comedy. No hardback house was interested. "They told me, 'Go way, no cookie, go way.'" After some flipflops of normal procedures took place, a publisher was found and William Peter Blatty's simple tale of demonic possession, "The Exorcist," made its way into print.

Then came the sales. Over 250,000 in hardback, 55 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list, ten paperback editions printed in a month and a half, translations circulating in Japanese, Hebrew, German, French, Dutch, Italian, Greek, Spanish, Swedish, even Turkish. Over four million copies in English alone. And more to come.

Now there is the movie. Produced and scripted by the author. Directed by boyish wonder Billy Friedkin in his first picture since the Academy Award-winning "The French Connection." Costing a largish \$6 million, taking 90 days to shoot, including a side trip to Nineveh in Iraq, starring, among others, Lee J. Cobb, Max von Sydow, Ellen Burstyn, Jason Miller and an unknown 13-year-old girl. And all of it ending up in Washington, D.C.

Because Blatty's psychic mother had an accurate premonition that he would get a four-year scholarship to Georgetown and insisted he apply there; because during his senior year he heard a story from the school's Jesuits about an exorcism performed in nearby Mt. Rainier, Md.; because he was enormously fond of Washington and set the story here when he finally came to writing it; because of all this and possibly more, a full film crew of one possum and 96 people, including boom man, gaffer, best boy, key grip and everybody else, would spend a month

in Washington transferring large parts of the novel into film. William Peter Blatty had come back.

"Fame Is Terrific"

Ten floors above the happily bubbling tinted water that guards the entrance, ten floors above the Gunga Din-type, pith-helmeted doormen, ten floors above the phalanxes of aggressive businessmen who pour out of the elevators like attaché-waving shock troops, he sits in tranquility and looks out the window.

On the desk in front of him are vast rows of index cards on which he makes an occasional note. Around the corner is a secretary whom he tells to remind him to call Groucho Marx in Hollywood. In another corner is a table containing a small army of liquor bottles and everything else from macadamia nuts to A-1 sauce and Frank's Diet Black Cherry Soda.

Outside of that floor-to-ceiling window at the Marriott Key Bridge is a real-life picture postcard, with the Potomac flowing easily under the towers of the new and old Georgetown libraries. William Peter Blatty looks at it all through his amazing, almost translucent turquoise eyes, and permits himself a smile. But only a small one. Everything in moderation.

"I love the school, I love Georgetown," he says soothingly. "I feel pleasure, a quiet contentment being here. It's got kind of a soft ambiance, the look of it is so delightful. I was here for eight years. I shouldn't be here now, I should be in New York. I wanted to be here."

His parents were Lebanese emigrants and 44-year-old Blatty retains the exotic physical darkness that somehow contrasts with his easygoing, tentative friendliness. His clothes are functional: jeans, Adidas shoes, Mickey Mouse watch and a white athletic shirt with blue sleeves that has the faded word "Georgetown"

printed on the front. He looks rather anonymous, and much of the time he is.

After ten years of unhappiness in the luxuriant anonymity of the Hollywood screenwriting world, Blatty thought "being the author of the number one bestseller was going to change all that.

"But I must tell you that operators and receptionists still ask me to spell my name four or five times and letters still come to Mr. Blappy, Blippy, Blitny, Blootly, Blotly and Blandly. I have about a thousand cards with various permutations of my name. You would not believe the number of permutations possible. And they still keep coming, you know. I keep getting these surprises." And very slowly, after a pause: "Fame is terrific."

There are all those wonderful, worshipful gatherings and get-togethers, but Blatty says he hasn't yet become "fully accustomed to the notion that when I'm invited to a party where I don't know the people, they aren't going to come up to talk to me. They're very, very shy. I have to go up and talk to them. I mean I haven't gotten those very simple things straight in my head yet, that of course they're going to be a little nervous, a little shy, that it's up to me to make the overtures."

Of course there is the money, so much that Blatty told one interviewer, "I expect to be able to buy the state of Rhode Island." First came his gross from the novel, close to one million dollars counting paperback sales. Then an advance of \$300,000 for his next three books, the first to be about his mother, a dauntless type who among other things thrust a jar of homemade quince jelly into President Roosevelt's hand with the injunction, "for when you have company." Finally there was the "Exorcist" movie deal with Warner Brothers for \$641,000 in cash plus better than 25 per cent of the profits, plus the prospect of similar deals with Columbia for his next three novels as well as lucra-

tive paperback deals for same. His first reaction to it all is a simple, cheery "I like it," but then the qualifications set in.

"My parents were immigrants," he says. "We never lived at the same address in New York for longer than two or three months at a time. Eviction was the order of the day. But there is an advantage to having a really impoverished childhood. I think if I had not had a really destitute childhood, young manhood, I would not have been able to handle everything that comes with being the author of 'The Exorcist.' It would have been very hard to handle."

Happy though he is with it, for the thing itself, for what it can do for his children, his relatives, Blatty claims that financial overabundance has come to him, dare one say, too late, at a time when there is not a whole lot he really wants, except "the only thing that thrills me, a house in Colorado, in the country as we called it in the tenements." But here too things are not ideal. "The frustrating thing is with all this money, I still can't get the house underway. Do you know anything about Aspen, Colorado? It's Mexico City north. Everything is 'manana.'"

Isn't it all at least the dream made tangible, the fantasy fulfilled? Well, not really . . . "It should have been. It is that for those around me who are closest to me. They feel it. For me, this kind of thing, the success aspect, or Horatio Alger comes home, takes too long to happen, it's too gradual.

"If I was still freshly out of Georgetown, or even ten years after Georgetown or still driving a Gunther beer truck as I did for a time here in town, and one night a manuscript that I had been scribbling in a garret by candlelight was suddenly sold at some incredible sum and a week later it was out and people were going mad for it and a week after that I was back here doing what I am doing now, I would be so excited

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they'd need 18 hospital attendants and an oxygen tent to take care of me.

"I mean I feel pleasure, but its too slow, its too gradual."

Funny Boy

After Georgetown, after the time behind the wheel of the Gunther beer truck, after some years in the Air Force, Blatty's writing career began to pull together in a startling, fairy tale type manner.

The once upon a time was 1957, when he was stationed in Beirut as an information officer with the USIA. "I met the wife of a political officer who had published an article in the Saturday Evening Post. I remember thinking at the time that if she could do it I certainly could do it. And I did."

One article in the Post led to another and another and another, including one recounting his adventures posing as the son of an Arabian prince, which led to Blatty's first book, "Which Way to Mecca, Jack?" and an appearance on the Jack Paar Show to promote it.

"During that interview, the wife of a motion picture producer who had a project in trouble at Columbia called her husband down and said (here Blatty's voice goes whiny, shrill and shrewish all at once) 'Billy, come and watch this boy, he's very funny.' So he came and watched me and contacted me within the week and asked if I would like to write a motion picture script."

That 1961 script was for "The Man From the Dinners Club," a Danny Kaye trifle that Blatty admits wasn't too hot. But it was the start, the first of ten he wrote over the next eleven years, including "Gunn," "Darling Lili," "What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?" and Blatty's personal favorite, "A Shot in the Dark," with Peter Sellers and Elke Sommer. Other novels also followed, including one that inspired a lawsuit from Notre Dame—"John Goldfarb Please Come Home"—one that is the author's personal favorite—"Twinkle, Twinkle, Killer Kane"—and one, "I, Billy Shakespeare," that sold "a spectacular 2,500 copies." Meanwhile Blatty had married, fathered three children, been divorced, and become increasingly overwrought with directors who made unfortunate changes in his scripts and publishers who didn't properly publicize his books.

Something that had happened in 1950, however, was to change all that. In that, his senior year at Georgetown, Blatty was hunting for a topic for an oratorical contest and Father Thomas Birming-

ham, a Jesuit who had taught him both at Brooklyn Poly and Georgetown, suggested demonic possession. He mentioned a case that had occurred in the Washington area just a year before, where a 14-year-old Mt. Rainier, Md. boy had reportedly been freed from the Devil's grip after 20 to 30 performances of the rite of exorcism over a two-month period.

Almost 20 years later, Blatty changed the victim's sex to female and the age to 12 and had the groundwork for a bestseller. And though the author hasn't met his

ager than a man of uneven intensity who talks of the Devil's strategy the way other people talk of the Redskins'.

Acknowledged as one of the Catholic church's experts on exorcism, Father Nicola is serving as the film's advisor on same. He considers himself a "psychic investigator" but concedes "There would be a lot of people, a lot of priests, Catholic priests as well as anybody else, who look at me and say, 'Oh, what a quack you are' and all that stuff. Well that's their bag and I've got my bag and that's fine."

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original source, who apparently has complete amnesia about the experience, and only spoke to members of the family after the book was published, Father John J. Nicola feels "The Exorcist" is "based principally, I'd say 80 per cent of the documentation," on that 1949 case.

Hideous Things

The man who knows the most about that experience, a lumpish looking 42-year-old diocesan priest from Chicago, Father Nicola sits in unlikely physical surroundings. Assistant director of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, his small office is in the building's basement. Its sea-green walls lit by dim fluorescents, it would seem more appropriate for a cafeteria man-

Father Nicola is enthused about the book because it "very truly and very graphically depicts what diabolical possession is really like — most people don't know that this type of thing happens" as well as "the church's very skeptical attitude toward it," the investigations that try, as Father Karras tried in "The Exorcist," to attribute the phenomenon to all other possible causes before reluctantly offering possession as the problem.

One of the few people who has seen all the documentation on that original 1949 case, still kept under lock and key in church archives, Father Nicola says it reads "as fascinatingly as the book does." He also feels, in contrast to the 14 or 15 cases he himself has investigated, that that episode was a genuine example of demonic possession, one of six or

seven such occurrences he says have taken place in America in the 20th century.

According to "The Roman Ritual," there are three criteria for possession, all of which, Father Nicola says, the Mt. Rainier case clearly fulfilled.

1. Conversing, not reciting, in languages other than those to which he was exposed: "This little 14-year-old, who had never studied a word of Latin, not only used it, but used it in very excellent conversation."

2. Physical phenomena that are way beyond the age and advancement of the person at a given time: "This little boy weighed less than 100 pounds—93 pounds—and they had him in fetters and everything. He broke loose on one occasion and broke the cheekbone of one of the four men trying to hold him down and broke the nose of someone else. They had taken everything away from him, to prevent him from committing suicide, but he broke a piece of spring off the bed and BAM just like that split a man's arm from elbow to wrist."

3. Knowledge of things that can't be known, the hidden past: "Invariably in a diabolical possession the diabolical voice tells hidden faults which the exorcist or other people present are very sensitive to from their past lives. This also happened in the 1949 case, when there was the revelation of an embarrassing thing in the exorcist's past."

There are other dangers to the potential exorcist besides mere loss of face: A local priest who participated in the Mt. Rainier exorcism had a nervous breakdown after it was over, Father Nicola said, and is still very sensitive on the subject. "Exorcisms are the most hideous things you can go through," Father Nicola says. "If I were asked to do one, I would beg off. I don't want any part of it. People think its a big lark and all that but that's not the way I see it, not at all."

In fact, what with helping the "Exorcist" crew and writing a book of his own called "Diabolical Possession," Father Nicola feels he is "very vulnerable right now. Because what I'm doing is declaring open warfare on the Devil, trying to open him up, to let men see him."

He remembers when he first started in on the subject in his student days he was told "You just don't tackle the Devil without subjecting yourself to dangers. If anything weird happens you drop it right away." And he says that whenever he intensifies his studies he has been "exposed to abnormal amounts of temptation . . . I feel more morally beleaguered." So much so that he does "an awful lot more praying," especially

the Prayer of St. Michael the Archangel, composed by Pope Leo XIII, who had similar problems:

"Defend us in battle, be our protection against the malice and snares of the Devil. Restrain him, O God, we humbly beseech Thee and do Thou, O, Prince of the Heavenly Host, by the divine power cast into hell Satan and the other evil spirits who roam through the world seeking the ruin of souls."

As for the future, "If anything happens physically I'd drop it like that. . . I plan once this thing is over to turn this whole thing off, just get out of it. This is an unwholesome type of activity."

The Devil Strikes

Though he never did much with it, the story of that small boy from Mt. Rainier stayed with Blatty for years. Even in 1957, when he "picked up the research merely to satisfy my own curiosity, I had no idea I would write a novel about it." Then in 1964, while doing the screenplay for "A Shot in the Dark," he brought the idea up to director Blake Edwards. "He offered me a great deal of money at the time, I think it was \$50,000, to give him the rights. I refused when he started talking about making the setting Salem, Massachusetts. Need I elaborate? He wanted to make it a Halloween show!"

When Blatty did begin the actual writing in 1969 his task was "complicated by the fact that I had no plot when I sat down to write it. I had mountains of research but no plot whatsoever. At the beginning I was just pleased simply to write a book that was not a humorous novel for a change. I just went from chapter to chapter until I was at least half-way through. I really believe, however, that the unconscious knows, that my unconscious knew the whole story and was divulging it to me a little at a time. Did I know it would be so popular? I must say I knew it, with this book I knew it."

As to why some people have refused to agree with him about the story's literary worth, Blatty suggests with a chuckle, "Of course, the first possibility is that it isn't great literature. The second is that a Hollywood screenwriter wrote it. And the third is that it deals with material and events which could easily be associated with exploitation literature."

He feels, however, that despite it all "the book will, God willing, survive. It is already surviving its normal life. Having run 55 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list we surmounted some of that early suspicion of its being a pot-boiler. An exploitationer just

doesn't have that kind of stuff. People now say 'Hey, it's all right to like this book. I don't have to be embarrassed, I don't have to carry it out of the store in a brown paper bag.' "

Even now, 23 years after the event, after the book, after the movie, what actually happened in that room in Mt. Rainier is a subject of some heat. Is there such a thing as demonic possession? William Peter Blatty thinks there is.

"That 1949 case is absolutely typical of all the classic cases of possession," he says. "The phenomena keep repeating themselves and that's one of the most compelling arguments for suspecting that there is more than mental illness or fraud or delusion involved. Because in every age, I mean predating Christianity, this is not a Christian phenomenon, in every part of the world you find the same symptomology. It is difficult to believe that this is always hysteria. How does the African know what the symptoms of possession are in Siberia?"

There was, for instance, a case related by Father Nicola, reported only last year by a missionary from Africa who was passing through Washington:

"He was preparing to baptize a young man on a Sunday afternoon, a young black man about 30 or 35. A lot of the man's friends were there and everything and as the priest went to pour the water of baptism on him the body suddenly shot up to the ceiling of the church some 40 feet high and hung suspended up there. When the priest got his composure he got out 'The Roman Ritual', read part of the rite of exorcism, sprinkled holy water, and the body came down and he finished the baptism."

"Though I consider this man a credible witness, some people will say, 'They're all kooks.' It's easy to call other people kooks, to say they didn't have these experiences, but that doesn't solve the human problem."

Blatty couldn't agree more. "There are a number of cases, very well documented with psychiatric expertise, which defy explanation on the basis of mental disorders, which defy explanation on the basis of delusion or fraud. Now each man may then interpret what happened according to his bias, as people always do, but I personally find it a fantastic reach to attribute those few cases to anything other than what it seems to be: possession by a disembodied intelligence. You may call it a demon, a devil, a spirit. I know it is something and I know it is not mental disorder."

A strong believer in psychic phenomena—"Is there any doubt? Can any rational and edu-

cated person deny it?"—a fan of Carlos Castaneda's writings on the Yaqui Indian shaman Don Juan, a reader of "Psychic Discoveries Behind The Iron Curtain," Blatty claims personal experience with inexplicable phenomena.

According to Father Nicola, Blatty told him he had sat on one side of a room and watched his telephone rise up and suspend in the air and then come slowly down. Blatty prefers not to discuss it, claiming "people will think I'm a nut," but did describe a flight on a Mexican airliner where an unidentified flying object was sighted: "My God, there it was. I mean there was something there, a bright flaming orange apparently spheroid object which was cruising below us."

Despite the fact that it had to be moving at least 450 miles an hour to keep up with the plane, the pilot's initial explanation was that it had been nothing more than a burning ship, a theory that infuriated Blatty.

"Rather than accept something contrary to the cultural bias, he reached out to the most incredible naturalistic phenomenon," he said, still amazed. "We can't always resort to calling these things the superstitious beliefs of the uneducated. And unknown causes is another reach that absolutely drives me crazy. It's the ultimate resort of these scientific idiots! Unknown causes. . ."

Scientists are also not Father Nicola's favorite type of people. Though he is quick to say, "Don't get me wrong, I'm not attacking science," he did have some less than kind words for a scientist who was present during parts of the 1949 exorcism.

"At one point while he was there one of these levitations took place. The boy's body stood out in the air, the cover stood out from the mattress and all this. He was all befuddled and they asked him, 'What's the explanation?' He said, 'Some day science will explain it.' Scientists can be equally as prejudiced in their faith as people whom they consider gullible or quacks."

Money Talks

Perhaps it was Pete Hubschmitt who heard about it first. It was only a rumor then, back in the cold winds of March, but Hubschmitt, energetically clean-cut and cheerful, does some of his best business on tips. Director of Sales and Marketing in charge of booking groups for the Marriott Key Bridge hotel, he had heard that the production manager for "The Exorcist" was in town looking for a place to house the crew during the shooting. "It took me 30 days to lure him over here," he

said proudly, "but we got him."

In his unyielding search for more and bigger groups, Hubschmitt has seen and put up with a lot. There was Chicago Bears malevolent linebacker Dick Butkus, enraged at being disturbed by a photographer while eating his pre-game training meal, chasing the unfortunate man out of the room, through the lobby and across the parking lot. There was snarling film director Michael Winner "yelling, screaming, breaking things like crazy." And still to come is the largest family reunion in the United States, consisting of 375 (count-em, 375) Lebanese. There is nothing, however, like a film company.

"The movie industry can inconvenience people all it wants and they love it," he says, grinning at the wonderful incongruity of it all. "I have met no one turned off by it, be they millionaire or plumber. A big crowd gets in their way, there's a traffic jam, but when they find out it's a movie they get excited instead of mad. The movie industry does things for people."

It also does things for the hotel. Like filling up more than a quarter of its rooms and 19 of its 31 suites during a traditionally slow period, accounting for an estimated 25,000 incoming and outgoing phone calls, and paying a bill totalling close to \$100,000, including \$25,000 for food, for a 30-day stay. And besides being good business there are the intangibles that accrue when a guest shares an elevator with Lee J. Cobb or bumps into Max von Sydow at the ice machine. In a business not overlaid with mystique, having a movie as a guest lends "a little bit of romance" to the surroundings.

To get these goodies, the hotel must do its bit. "We've gotten a reputation," beams Hubschmitt. "You do it right, you get more business. We work with them, we bend over backwards."

Which means not blanching when heavy equipment is dragged across the lobby and not blinking when a request comes in to strip a guest room of all of its furniture so it can be used to store film or wardrobes or what-have-you. "Some hotels would look at you and say 'ha' if you asked for that," Hubschmitt says. "But it pays off in the end."

And so, presumably, does finding a parking lot where 13 big trucks can park for a month, and finding off-duty Arlington policemen to guard them. And finding just the right suite for director Friedkin, one with a den and a separate office connecting to his secretary's office. Not to mention finding three separate but equal matching suites for stars Cobb, Burstyn and Linda Blair, so none

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of them would get jealous and collapse in pouting snits. And then there is the matter of Bill Blatty's lunch.

"He came into my office one day and said, 'I need your help,'" Hubschmitt remembered. "He said he needed a special lunch for a diet or something. A 12-ounce rare hamburger, open face with cheddar cheese and sautéed onions, the same thing every day. 'I can't live without it,' he said. So we have the chef make it up special every day. Reputation is the name of the game."

The Crush of Fame

The first public sign that an honest-to-gosh motion picture was to be made in Washington was a small, brisk ad that appeared on the inside of an inside page of The Washington Post. "EXTRAS NEEDED FOR MOTION PICTURE 'THE EXORCIST' ALL TYPES ALL AGES" it read in naked capitals, with appropriate hours and location following.

The man who placed the ad, casting director Louis DiGiaino, had seen people change their name to Italian in hopes of getting bit parts in "The Godfather." There were 600 such parts available for this picture, at salaries ranging from \$35.65 to \$138 per day. Almost twice that many people showed up, so many that fights erupted in the Marriott lot over parking spaces. The entire hotel floor was filled with eager bodies, so many that some guests were unable to get out of their rooms. So many that the hotel manager wanted the halls cleared as a fire hazard. "We'll worry about that later," was DiGiaino's reaction. "Keep sending 'em in. We're paying a lot of money."

Once inside the room, lined up at the back wall like so many suspects in the crime of the century, prospective extras came face to face with the endlessly good humored DiGiaino and his Sony videorecorder, on which they were to recite name and phone number. For many this proved a problem, for even simple things got botched up in everyone's awful eagerness to please, the forced cheerfulness, the fear of doing even the slightest little thing to offend the man who could put *their* face up on the big screen.

While this was going on DiGiaino has picked out perhaps the most attractive woman of the afternoon, sits her down, shyly grabs her pinkie and asks, "You're my date for tonight?" She smiles and agrees but says as she leaves, "If anyone better comes up, I'll understand."

The crowd refuses to slow

down. Personal pleas by his assistant, by DiGiaino himself, even a sign downstairs saying it's all over do not end things. Convinced that one look at their faces will lead to the crush of fame, people simply refuse to go away. They hang around the halls, hide behind pillars, sneak up stairs, claim the author sent them, the director. They ask for work as photographers, psychologists, carpenters, anything. "I've got a lot of imagination and talent, I'm sure you can use me," one man says earnestly. DiGiaino has run out of replies.

No, he says, no one has ever offered him their body for a part. Of course there was the time when he heh-heh asked a girl who wanted to leave some publicity photos if she had any nudes. "'Sure' she said, and whipped out a whole sheet of contacts. Very tasteful, she said. She wanted me to help her choose one. Right here in Washington, D.C.!"

For now, however, DiGiaino was looking for something different. He left the room and returned with a bottle of Dewar's White Label scotch. He had a glass poured over ice and turned to face yet another matron who had wandered in in search of Hollywood immortality.

"We're not drunks here," he explained. "But we've had a bad day."

Woe Is Me

They are shooting "The Exorcist," William Peter Blatty informs in pleased tones, "at what we call the masterpiece pace."

Of course, there have been, continue to be, and will probably always be, problems. Big ones, little ones, unspoken and trumpeted ones, so many that it seemed the company would feel distinctly ill at ease if everything suddenly went right.

First there was the screenplay and Blatty, with a decade of screenwriting behind him, was worried before he even started. "Usually the screenwriter stands outside the theater on opening night and rends his garments and gnashes his teeth in rage and frustration," he said, pleased to have escaped these emotions this time around. "So many people can kill you in the production of a motion picture: the actor, the director, the cameraman. I have written many screenplays I wouldn't pay a dollar to go into a theater to see. But in this case they are vastly improving on the novel."

This was not easy coming either, for when Blatty did his first draft of the script, before Friedkin was hired to direct, "I really thought it was going to be impos-

sible to make a motion picture out of the novel. I saw problems other people wouldn't see, problems of externalizing internal events, that were I thought almost insurmountable unless we wanted to go for a five-hour movie."

Enter Friedkin. "The first thing Billy asked me to do after I hired him was please, please be faithful to the novel. 'Can we go back to the novel?' (Recited in mock plaintiveness) And we did. Billy wouldn't even refer to my original draft; he made markings in his copy of the book. He's now read it over twenty times."

After the script came the casting. Ellen Burstyn, best known as Jacy's mother in "The Last Picture Show," became Chris MacNeil, the possessed girl's mom, after both Shirley MacLaine and Jane Fonda turned it down. Jason Miller, author of the highly successful Broadway play, "That Championship Season," got the role of Father Karras, the young exorcist, even though he'd never appeared in a film before. Max von Sydow, the gaunt veteran of endless Ingmar Bergman movies, was chosen for his elder counterpart, Father Merrin and Lee J. Cobb will be the unkempt Inspector Kinderman. All that was relatively simple. Finding someone to play Regan, the 12-year-old victim of possession, was not.

"We had exhausted Hollywood," said Blatty, exhausted at the very thought. "They were all cutesy-poo Shirley Temples, little actresses not little girls, and so old in their heads it was frightening. What came out in some of those interviews was jarring, to say the least." A trip to New York followed, where "we looked at hundreds of girls in the public school system, non-professionals," before one was chosen.

That was Linda Blair, at 13 a year older than the girl in the book, an active horsewoman, winner of a Presidential fitness citation, a model for various back-to-school type clothing ads, and someone who thinks "all the shocking things in 'The Exorcist' are just silly and giggles after every take. She doesn't know what grown men are doing. Of course, a lot of grown men wonder about what grown men are doing."

Though Linda's mother is always on the set and though Blatty says she has "a very sound, sturdy psyche" he is aware that "there will be an unspoken objection on the part of many people to her doing those things," the demonic things, the sexual things described in the book. "But you have to remember in addition to her own attitude toward it, she is doing this in an atmosphere in which she is surrounded by tech-

nicians, equipment, bright lights, activity, cables. I mean it's fantasyland. It's a movie, it's not a psychodrama."

For all the fuss involved, the actual shooting done in Washington would form for the most part the uninteresting sections of the film. All the interiors, all the scenes of hogwild demonic activity, were done on a soundstage in New York, so it was almost exclusively exteriors, scenes of people gamboling through the Georgetown area, that would take place here. Not, of course, without more problems.

First there was the noise. The proximity of National Airport with its constant airplane landings and endless noise meant that many of the scenes will have to be "looped": filmed silent with the sound added later. One of the book's pivotal scenes, Chris' first meeting with Father Karras, is set on Key Bridge, but had to be moved to the C&O canal because of the excessive noise. "And then the hurricane came along," Blatty grumbled. "Don't tell me there's no devil."

A bigger problem still was the government of the District of Columbia. Unaccustomed to having movie companies on its turf, it responded with enough obfuscation to drive some of the "Exorcist" people up the wall. Endless committees, councils and commissions and enormous amounts of paperwork had to be gone through before simple permits could be obtained and construction coordinator Gene Lauritzen, a Hollywood veteran of some 28 years and 400 movies, allowed as how, "It's a lot more complicated here than anywhere else."

In San Francisco, for example, it took him "only 20 minutes with the mayor, 20 minutes with the police and 20 minutes with the people involved" to arrange a spectacular cable car crash for "Daddy's Gone A-Hunting." "I've done all kinds of things with no problems," he says "But here it took me five days to even get through to one office. Here even the small things are big problems."

"If the rest of the country is run like Washington," he concluded wearily, "there is no hope."

Ego Trips

If unhappiness with Washington was radiated by some of the "Exorcist" people, the feeling was more than mutual in parts of the capital. Georgetown University, Blatty's alma mater on whose campus a good bit of the shooting was done, was one of those places.

"Egos," muttered Art Ciervo, the school's pub-

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licity director. "They aren't easy to work with. They mean well but they literally take over a place. They like to take over anything and everything. They change their minds every day. These people are quite demanding."

Father Robert J. Henle, the university's president, had opened the campus to the film crew even though some in the academic community felt that many of the school's alumni would be upset by the obscenities and sexual actions in the film.

"There's always some alumni offended no matter what I do," he responded with a laugh. "I don't anticipate any reaction but I wouldn't be surprised. There was even a reaction against letting Senator Kennedy speak on campus. I hardly ever make a statement without somebody getting offended."

In addition to the publicity and the campus' tradition of being open, there was the fact that Blatty had been a very devoted alumnus, had a son at Georgetown, had in fact named his film company "Hoya Productions" and had already given some of his royalties to the school. And Father Henle said he had heard a rumor—"It's strictly grapevine"—that Warner Brothers, which was eventually to give \$5,000 to the Metropolitan Police Department Boys Clubs to show appreciation for police cooperation in blocking streets and such, "intends to give some kind of gift to the university."

Boxwoods Forever

Directly behind William Peter Blatty's head as he swivels in his office chair, perched over a dungeon-like stone wall that over-looks a gas station, sits a two-story brick house, a solid pedestrian structure when compared to more

graceful neighbors. But to the "Exorcist" crew it was perhaps the most vital of all concerns.

For though Blatty had written in an author's note at the end of his book that "the house on Prospect Street," the house where the possession and exorcism take place, "does not exist," it was obvious that this house, the \$150,000 number at 3600 Prospect St., was the only one that could be used for the shooting. For it was the only one close to an aged group of ratty stone steps, generally littered with leaves, dirty paper and empty cans, down which two of the characters in the book fall to their deaths.

The house belongs to Mrs. Florence Stephenson Mahoney, a Washington society figure who was devoted above all else to a group of English boxwood trees on her lawn, delicate things that grow perhaps an inch a year and are worth about \$1,000 each. And before she would agree to anything, they had to be provided for.

"The problem is one of our blocking the sun, of keeping them in darkness," Blatty explained. "They can't go too many hours a day without sun. We had to go to the head of the National Botanical Society to find out how you protect boxwoods and prevent their growth from being stunted. Based upon that we resorted to a number of very ingenious ways of keeping the sunlight on them, keeping them from being in the shade at all.

"Then we had to go into the problems of can you replace them, how long does it take to grow. Anyway, we went for months in delicate contract negotiations, we got all those assurances, we finally got everything all worked out with the boxwoods and suddenly on the last day, the day the contract was to be signed, the owner sud-

denly realized, 'Hey, I'm not going to be able to see out of my bathroom window.' "

Finally, however, "she resigned herself to it. She is a very nice woman. As a matter of fact I am amazed that anyone would be that kind and patient. Who wants a bunch of movie technicians tramping around your yard, destroying your plants and vegetation?"

Once the okay was given, a small army of those technicians, some brought in all the way from Los Angeles almost two months before the start of shooting, went to work on the property. One immediate problem was a massive elm tree whose overhanging branches obscured the view of the house. The shooting had been postponed twice until enough leaves had fallen to make it more visible, the man who predicts the cherry blossoms blossoming having been consulted as to when that might be. To facilitate things further, a block and tackle system gradually raised the tree's branches little by little until the whole house was visible. The broken iron railing on the stone steps was replaced by two new strong ones that could support a camera and its operator. And the high split wooden log fence that surrounded the house was replaced by a brick and iron one that again insured more visibility.

The largest concern was the house itself. In the book it extended right to the edge of the steps, while in actuality it stops some 40 feet away. The solution was to build a 25-foot by 25-foot extension at a cost of \$50,000, doubling the size of the structure at one gulp. The new addition, made of fiberglass sprayed on a mold, had to be strong enough to withstand the same wind resistance as

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the building itself. One of its walls was made removable so the boxwoods could have as much sun as possible. A new roof covering both the old and new parts was built and the completed structure looked frighteningly realistic even a few feet away. Yet to coordinator Gene Lauritzen, who had among other things built an entire 23-building town, including train station and water tower, for "The Cheyenne Social Club," this was an easy job, and his charges agreed.

"There's no romance whatsoever, only so many sticks of wood, so many nails," one of the Los Angeles carpenters said. "I never go to see movies I've worked on. I'd know it's all faked and phony. It wouldn't be any fun."

Taking a Dive

Also not very much fun was the scene that was the centerpiece of the filming in Washington, and possibly of the entire movie: Father Karras jumping out of the second story of that house and falling down those 76 cold stone steps to Canal Road more than 50 feet below.

Instead of actor Jason Miller doing this, a veteran stuntman named Chuck Waters would be paid an estimated \$4,000 to simulate the death plunge in two equally hair-raising stunts. Later, three cameras wrapped in foam would be thrown down the stairs also, so the folks in the theater could get an idea what the fall was like.

First would come the jump. Since the outer wall of the addition was a good 15 feet from the steps, a matching wall was constructed out of balsa wood and "candy glass" (made from heated resin) and placed right at the edge of the stairs. Dressed in a cassock, Waters was to jump from its second story into no more than a pile of cardboard boxes. His first jump through the window was too slow, on his second the cassock caught in the frame and he had to

fight his way out. The third take was fine, but the crew had been prepared for many more misses, at least 20 replicas of the window had been constructed in case Friedkin's passion for the just-so should get the best of things.

The next part, the fall down those old stone stairs, was more gruesome. The stairs had been covered with an inch of foam and Waters wore a wet suit to cut down on superficial injuries, but many spectators still expected him to merely execute a roll. Instead a ramp was put up at the top of the stairs and the stuntman flew off it like a diver.

Under his clothing was a gallon plastic bag filled with animal blood. When his back hit the stairs it went splat all over everything. And when Waters finally got to the bottom, his head seemingly twisted out of shape, the blood was allowed to ooze out of a tube near his neck until it formed a gory puddle about the shape of Long Island.

Mrs. Mahoney, the woman who made this all possible, speaks of it with a voice that seems to come from another century. "At first I wasn't interested in anything like that," she says distantly. "But the man who wrote it came to see me. He was a very nice man. They're all very nice people. They said they couldn't do the thing any other way. It seemed disagreeable not to agree."

She did not, however, bargain for "so much confusion. I had no idea there would be this much confusion. They said they were only going to put up a fake wall. Now I know what a fake wall is."

Was there at least a teensy bit of excitement at being the center of a Hollywood production? "Heavens no, not the slightest bit. In Paris once, Preminger was making a picture in a house where I was, and it was a terrible bore. I'm so innocent about pictures, I don't know anyone in pictures since Garbo.

"I see why they charge so much to see them, though. They spend so much money on things like this." ■